GOD IS NO TRADITIONALIST

January 18, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 43:14-21
John 1:29-34
Revelation 21:1-5

"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth,..." --Isaiah 43:18,19 (RSV)

"I waited patiently for the Lord,"
the Psalmist confessed,
"The Lord... heard my cry...and drew
me up from the pit, out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock.
The Lord put a new song in my mouth.."
(extractions from Psalm 40:1-3)

And I can almost hear someone saying from the back pew in a stage whisper audible to all around, "What was wrong with the old song?" Well, what is wrong with the old song? Having been rescued by God from an oozing pit of quick sand and placed on a solid rock, why can't the Psalmist sing something we know? Why not a familiar tune? There are plenty of them. Now, this is not an essay on choosing the hymns for Sunday worship, although after a very few years in this business, we clergy learn that there is no topic about which people can become heated more readily. Sexual ethics, church and state, the morality of war, harboring illegal aliens - it seems we can survive it all so long as we sing hymns everyone knows. "Who chooses the hymns?" we are asked far more frequently than "What was your exegetical resource for your interpretation of Romans 5?" The secret at Fourth Church is that both the pastor and organist/choirmaster share the responsibility of choosing hymns. Sometimes I do it: sometimes he does it: sometimes I choose one and he chooses the others: sometimes we discuss it, sometimes we don't. There is no pattern. That way, when someone corners me and says "Who chose the hymns?" I can say Dr. Simmons, with a bit of accuracy, and he can respond similarly.

What's wrong with the old song? Nothing actually, except that God isn't much of traditionalist, likes new music, in fact is something of an innovator, an experimenter, an expert at doing new things. God's people, on the other hand, are inclined to be traditionalists, to absolutize every high and holy moment, to hang on the past for dear life, to cling to the present desperately and in the process to back into the future, often missing the new things God is doing, unable to see ahead, like a driver hurtling down the highway, eyes riveted to the rear-view mirror. It's a

problem in the Bible, because the Bible is consistently hopeful. Even when the immediate future looks awful, the Bible finds a way of being hopeful about it.

Human history is often the story of those special people who had a sense of the newness which was happening at the moment, the ones who understood that circumstances required a brave new approach. Abraham Lincoln was one of them. One month before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, December 1, 1862, he delivered a speech to the Congress. It was an extraordinarily troubled time in the life of the nation and in his personal life. His speech that day was undistinguished, rambling, until the end when he said one of the wisest things he or anyone ever said..."The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew. We must disenthrall ourselves."

That's a very Biblical sentiment. "We must disenthrall ourselves." It sounds exactly like something a prophet of God wrote to a people 2,500 years ago, who had about decided that the future looked so awful all that was left for them was to clutch desperately to the memories of the past. It was a difficult time. All that was left of Judah was in captivity, exiled in Babylon. In the Sixth Century B.C. a once proud nation was in ruins and its leaders had been prisoners in a foreign land for more than a generation. The future did not look good. Babylonian policy was to welcome the exiled Jews, to invite them to assimilate, to become part of the neighborhood. It was a seductive and nearly successful policy to eliminate the Jews by absorbing them. As the older ones sensed what was happening, actually saw the end of the race, one can imagine them clinging even more tightly to the past, the stories, the customs, the memories. The traditions would keep them alive. Now, to make matters worse, Babylon, their captor nation, was threatened by Persia. What would happen when the nation in which they were held captive was overrun by Persians was anyone's guess, but it couldn't possibly be good.

So he wrote to them in some of the purest, loveliest poetry in the Bible, a prophet whose work begins two-thirds of the way through the Book of Isaiah. "Comfort, comfort my people...speak tenderly to Jerusalem and say to her that her warfare is ended." He gave the world precious images of God and God's way with us. "Behold, my servant. I have put my spirit upon Him. He will bring forth justice to the nation." His theological legacy would be honored thousands of times when people in danger and stress and uncertainty remembered. "Those who wait for the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles: they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." The prophet recalled the past and reminded the captives in Babylon how God had once led their forebears out of another bondage, out of Egypt, through the sea and the wilderness. The memory of the Exodus was the most powerful reality in the religion of Israel. The prophet recalled it, celebrated it, affirmed it, and then, with no warning...

> "Remember not the former things,
> nor consider the things of old.
> Behold I am doing a new thing.
> Now it springs forth, do you not
> perceive it?"

The N.E.B. translates - "Cease to dwell on days gone by."

"Do not cling to the events of the past," the T.E.V. translates it.

The past is remembered, revered and honored. Those who neglect to learn from history are condemned to repeat it. What the prophet urges the people to do is recall what God once did in order to see what God is doing in the present and will do in the future. If the only place you look for God, that is to say, is in venerable tradition, sacred custom, revered memory, you are going to miss something. God is already out ahead, in the future.

The human dynamic which bumps into this Biblical motif is traditionalism. It belongs to our humanity, apparently, to deal with change and uncertainty by looking backward. And as an apologia for our traditionalism, let it be said once more that no one in history ever had to deal with as many changes as we must, therefore, no one ever had more reason to be traditionalists, to look backward, than we do. A new Arthur Schlesinger book, The Cycles of American History, documents the thesis that dealing with change is our first and most important priority. The author cites the "acceleration" theory of historian Henry Adams who, around the turn of the century, realized that the human story was not only changing radically, but that the rate of change was accelerating. Adams realized that his 1860's Harvard diploma was actually closer, intellectually and scientifically, to the year 1, than it was to 1904. All the human history until fairly recently, was stable, static. People lived essentially the same, century after century. People in 2000 B.C. and 1000 A.D. used the same methods of transportation, communication, commerce, medicine, and education... Schlessinger writes, "Humans have lived on earth for possibly 800 life-times, most of which they spent in caves. Moveable type appeared only 8 life-times ago, industrialization in the last 3 life-times...The last two life-times have seen more scientific and technological achievement than the first 798 put together." (New York Times Magazine), 7/27/86. An interesting aside is that change is happening so rapidly, parents no longer teach children, children have to teach parents - about the new developments. I have to ask my son to reset my digital watch, wait for my son-in-law to connect the compact disc player and my daughter to tell me what music to listen to on it.

In a time of rapid and frightening change, the past becomes very important. A knowledge of the past can help us negotiate our way into the future. Secretary of State, Gen. George Marshall, in the midst of the Berlin Blockade, with the world tottering on the brink of World War III, was asked by an aide, how he could remain so calm. "I've seen worse" Gen. Marshall said. (Schlesinger, New York Times, op.cit.)

The fatal human flaw, however, is to try to drag the past into the present, to insist that the institutions of the past are adequate for the present. In this year of the Constitutional Bi-Centennial, scholars will discuss the amazing durability of our Constitution, and they will tell us that the durability of the document and the system has something to do with its elasticity and flexibility. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observed that "the art of free society is...in the fearlessness of

- Presby - Bi-Cent

revision. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of life stifled by useless shadows. "Symbolism in Religion and Literature," in Rollo May, My Search for Beauty, p. 171)

Our world, our nation, our city need to know that. The old ways don't work any longer. The old ways are making urban unemployment, poverty and crime, worse instead of better. Someone has to look forward, not backward. Internationally, history would seem to dictate the violent end of the world. There is no more venerable tradition than militarism and war-making; if we are locked into traditions and custom, someone sooner or later is going to fire one of those things at someone else. Someone has to think anew and have the moral courage to keep thinking anew.

Some are, but it's a difficult task to get a hearing. The barrier is traditionalism. I attended the Global Conference of the World Future Society in Toronto once, as part of a denominational responsibility. It was a remarkable conclave of scientists, inventors, business people, educators, officials from all over the world. It was a very hopeful but disturbing affair. Everyone who had taken the trouble to attend the conference was there out of a commitment to the future. The economists were saying that the two basic ways of thinking economically, i.e. free-market capitalism and state controlled communism, are both inadequate; one leads to unemployment, the other to inflation. Someone has to think anew. The political scientists were saying that what is happening in Poland and China is indicative of vast social and political change and that it is related to what is happening in South Africa and Nicaragua. The world needs new political structures, new concepts, neither Western nor Eastern, but new. Meanwhile, the communications people were setting up computer networks through which people all over the world can have ongoing conversations, to replace trade journals, they said, because in computers, at least, a printed journal is out of date before the ink is dry.

There was a track on religion at the conference. It was not very well attended. Frankly, it was dull. It didn't have much to say about the future. I kept returning to it, out of a sense of responsibility, hoping for a relevant word, and invariably left to catch the excitement generated across the hall in workshops on architecture and environmental management. An article I read after the conference concluded that the religion track spent most of its time "arguing for the past."

The simple truth is that religion does that much of the time. "Remember not the former things...Behold, I am doing a new thing" the prophet wrote. The irony is that the whole Global Conference on the future was testimony in the broadest sense to that 2,500 year old theological insight. God the creator is doing a host of new things, now it is springing forth. And the people who know it should be the very ones pointing ahead, leading, showing the way, out of a deep trust in the Creator who the other futurists don't know about, mostly because they have heard only about the past from his representatives.

Jesus said, "do this in memory of me." Memory is important. Our traditions are precious. But sometimes the memory, the traditions, are all there is. It's one thing to preserve the traditions. It's another thing

to praise the Lord only in music that must be at least a century old. It's one thing to remember the past, it's another thing to attempt to communicate what we believe only in philosophic categories and religious language that haven't been used or understood since the fourth century. It's one thing to keep faith with the past. It's another thing to try to answer the pressing ethical dilemmas the brave new world is creating for us on the basis of realities that haven't been around for 100 years.

God is no traditionalist. The dogmas of the quiet past are never totally adequate for the present and sometimes downright dangerous for the future. And so you and I, in our time, as people before us in uncertain times did, must learn to act and think differently, in new ways. And the promise of the Scripture is that when we do we are going to be surprised. We are going to find God - out in front of us.

I conclude that when we think about God, our minds automatically shift into past tense. Anthropomorphism, i.e. defining God in human term is dangerous, but if you insist on it, why a white robe? Why not a business suit? If we have a concept of God, it is located somewhere back in time. If we have any notion of creation, it is something God started and completed a long time ago. Let me suggest that those are the kinds of ideas that need to change.

Distinguished European theologian, Carl Braaten, helped me with a stunning new concept of God...He wrote - "God's transcendence can be conceived of today as the absolute power of the future. He comes to us not 'from above' but 'from ahead.'" Ted Peters, Futures Human & Divine, p. 152)

American Professor, Ted Peters, - in a book on the future, - likewise..."The power of creation is at the end, not the beginning. God did not create the world once upon a time as a watchmaker creates a watch, winds it up and then lets it run. Rather, creation is still going on. It is a process of being drawn toward a final future when everything will come into its full being." (Ibid, p. 153). God is not located in the past. The past is gone. What we have are memories of God's presence in the past. God is in the future - ahead of us. Creation is a pull from ahead instead of a push from behind.

For most of us that is a very different way of thinking about God. But it leads, I submit, to hope; not to despair and anxiety but to a profound hopefulness about the future. "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth."

None of us knows what lies ahead, internationally, nationally, not even personally. In fact, it is at the personal level where uncertainty and change becomes most frightening. The Biblical witness is good news. The Gospel of Christ is fundamentally expectant, forward-looking, hopeful. It is not, please understand, simply rosy, positive thinking. The Gospel is hopeful about the future because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that event in which we believe God confirmed his power over every other authority in life and his presence always with us in life, in the future, in death, in life eternal.

Christian people have been indomitable when they have remembered that. 95 AD, for instance, and Roman persecution was intensifying, and people were being burned to death and hanged on crosses for their faith, and their weekly meetings were watched and raided, and dear ones beaten and friends tortured and even one's own children could unwittingly bring disaster on parents, relatives, friends. And one of them wrote a letter as a prophet had done six hundred years before. This writer was in exile on the Island of Patmos, and he wrote in a cryptic literary code in order to fool the Romans which apparently he did. We know his letter to those desperate, frightened people as the Book of Revelations. Listen to what he said - our first theology of the future: - "I saw a new heaven and a new earth...God will be with his people...He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning or crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away...Behold, I make all things new."

They read that. And they understood, even as the arrests and beatings and torture and executions continued, that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was out there in the future drawing them to Him: that the future is God's. And so have countless others, in similar circumstances across the years, known that the present may be lived in and sometimes endured because the future is God's. In the Roman Arena, in Nazi concentration camps, in Soviet mental hospitals, in jails in the American South in the 60's, in prisons in South Africa,...and in hospital rooms, in every place where people face pain and uncertainty and change - and sickness and loss and death...in these places Christian people have heard and understood... "Remember not the former things. Behold, I make all things new.."

God is no traditionalist. You will find God in the future, making all things new, and that may require that you think anew.

None of us can know what lies ahead. Something Sandburg wrote about Lincoln's time strikes me as descriptive of our times. "It was sunset and dawn, moonrise and noon, dying time and birthing hour - " (The Prairie Years and The War Years, p. 191).

We cannot know the future... nor do we know what lies ahead for even our families, ourselves. We do have a choice to make, however, between two alternatives. We can spend the time God has given worrying about uncertainty, change. We can invest ourselves in the task of preserving the past and inevitably be lured into trying to do our living there as well. Or we can welcome the future with head held high, eyes wide open, eager, anticipating, watching, expecting, because we know our Lord and God is out ahead of us making all things new. That seems to me a better, and more interesting, and more faithful alternative, by far.

Amen.